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Democratic Education In The Egyptian Higher Education: Investigation Of Tutors' Perception Of Democratic Education In The Egyptian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Democratic education (DE) sees young people not as passive recipients of knowledge, but rather as active co-creators of their own learning and valued participants in a learning community. This study investigates tutors' understanding and implementation of DE in the Egyptian Higher Education (HE). It investigates HE tutors' conception about learners controlling their educational process by being fully embedded in it. Data for this qualitative paper was collected from 20 tutors from two Egyptian universities via one-to-one interviews and focus groups. This study highlighted the inference of political events in Egypt, since 2011, on HE students in their way of thinking and reflecting and addressed the need of DE to be a part of the educational paradigm. This paper concluded that DE is based on placing students in the centre of their learning and empowering them. Also, tutor-student dialogic approach and tutor-student trust are essential approaches to implement DE.

Keywords: democratic, empowerment, autonomy, resistance, student-centre, engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION: DEFINITION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Gribble (2005) defines DE in its simplest terms as sharing between tutors and students. This definition explains that the benefit of DE is enhancing the relationships between students and tutors, as both tutors and students work together democratically in active participation to create a positive environment. Dewey (2011) explains that, for students, the path to practice democracy in education is to answer questions about what to learn, when to learn, how to learn, and how to assess learning. To answer these questions, Dewey (2011) considered both empowering learners to make decisions within learning, and the students' ownership of the learning created to be important elements for DE.

Hecht (2011), the founder of the democratic school system, considers DE as a developmental process encouraging autonomy and independence of learners. This process accompanies people throughout their lifetime, increases their awareness of their community and helps them to achieve their goals. Hence, DE gives students the feeling of being valued and respected (Hart, 1997). Moreover, for learners as citizens in a community, DE includes tolerance of diversity and mutual respect between individuals and groups (Purkis and Bowen, 2004). Dewey (1916) extended the definition of democracy to the social perspective beyond the political, since a community does not entail government only, but also people who affect and are affected by the government. Moreover, Dewey (2011) linked democracy and education explaining that a government would suffer if it is not elected by educated people who can live in equality and freedom. Consequently, education becomes the gate for democratic people in a democratic community, as education prepares people for citizenship.

For the implementation of DE, democracy in general entails two main principles: giving popular control to decision-making and equality of rights to exercise that control (Beetham and Boyle, 1995). Therefore, democratic governmental systems honour citizens' rights to vote and speak freely (Levin, 2007). Notably, because democracy is based on people and their decision making, it entails discussions of, as well as remaking and re-valuing, these decisions. Therefore, in a democratic community, people and opinions are forever changing their form and place, and the democratic community goes through rapid and non-stop transformation.

For DE, Carr and Hartnett (1996) differentiate between two types of DE; firstly, the classical conception of democracy in which democracy is seen as a form of power; secondly, the contemporary conception in which democracy is seen as political decision-making (see Table 1 below).

	Classic Democracy	Contemporary Democracy
The primary aim of education	To initiate individuals into the values, attitudes and modes of behaviour appropriate to active participation.	To offer the minority an education appropriate to future political leaders and the majority an education fitted to their primary social role as producers, workers and consumers.
Curriculum Content	There is a focus on liberal education, based on critical thinking and reflective learning	Education will focus on real life world, skills and that knowledge that have some market value.
Typical educational processes	Participatory practices that cultivate the skills and attitudes that democratic discussion require.	Pedagogical relationships will be based on authoritarianism and competition.

Table 1: Comparison between the classic democracy and the contemporary democracy (Carr and Hartnett, 1996)

Looking at the above table, some aspects of DE imply giving learners the autonomy and independence to build their learning goals. These goals are based on individual values, attitudes and modes of appropriate behaviour. In other aspects, DE is more social and implies participatory and collaborative co-operation between learners to accommodate their individual goals into a common goal and share their experience.

In the author's view, an integrated DE is a mix between the classic and contemporary conceptions of democracy, since curriculum content is expected to be based on critical and reflective thinking (exists in the classic DE). These skills allow students to apply their learning in their daily life practices (exists in contemporary DE). In addition, DE has implications from two different directions, the collaborative and social direction on the one side (exists in contemporary DE). On the other hand, it encourages the individuality of learning (exists in classic DE).

The aforementioned concepts such as: learners' autonomy, engagement and independence highlight the concept of placing the student in the centre of learning, "Student-Centred Learning" as a term was conceived by Carl Rogers in 1956 (Rogers, 1994). Hence, there are elements that SCL has in common with DE. For example, DE's flow and exchange of ideas through students' engagement and participation, critical thinking and problem solving (Okenyi, 2007). According to McCombs and Whistler (1997), SCL similarly helps students to think critically while learning to analyse, evaluate and be reflective towards their own learning. Moreover, Hecht (2011), explaining the importance of independence and autonomy in learning, agrees that the benefits of SCL

lie in it being based on a student's individual choices, interests, needs, abilities, learning styles, types of intelligences and educational goals. Therefore, similarities exist between SCL and DE not only regarding approaches and principles, but extending to practice and learning skills that are used to achieve these principles. SCL is thus an acknowledged part of DE. In other words, SCL is a forward step to DE.

1.2 DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION IN EGYPT

Egypt occupies the most North Eastern part of the African continent. Egypt is part of a group of countries known formally as SANE (South Africa, Algeria, Nigeria, and Egypt). These countries account roughly for half of the continent's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), nearly a third of its population and fifth of the total land area in Africa (Oxford Business Group, 2010). SANE countries share half of Africa's exports, trade balance and foreign direct investment. Particularly in education, there are some similarities between these four countries regarding some aspects in school systems such as school expenditures and enrolment rate. Significantly, there is similarity in sustaining democracy (Anyanwu and Erhijakpor, 2007).

In the context of Egyptian culture and HE, the question to be addressed is whether there is DE in the Egyptian HE or not. Based on the Dewey's view (2011) linking democracy and education explaining that a government would suffer if it is not elected by educated people who can live (see section: Democratic Education: definition and implementation). Therefore, Eldawdi (2012) and Farag (2013) explained many reasons behind the difficulty to achieve democracy in Egypt. For Eldawdi (2012), economic recession and low income of the Egyptian citizens are barriers for them to control their lives. As a result, ignoring poverty, unemployment and alienating youth will lead to neither economic reforms nor democracy. Farag (2013), focused on the role of youth and education to achieve democracy. In detail, giving youth the voice whether liberal discourse, religious or social democratic, encouraging them to brainstorm, discuss and debate can lead policy makers to predict the future that is aligned with their attitudes, ideas and values.

Regarding to students' voice, Eldawdi (2012) describes the cognitive and social changes that happened after the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 and its impact on the Egyptian youth for expressing views. In detail, the ways of thinking and reflecting among Egyptian youth (whether male or female) have changed dramatically after this political event. In general Egyptian youth, started to speak out more loudly about what they need and think about the social, economic and political aspects of their life - they discussed, shared ideas, and managed conflicts. Compared with the situation before the Egyptian revolution, Farag (2013) claims that young people, before 2011, were caught up in a negative trend of dependency, and of not wanting to participate in political and social integration. Noticeably, after the Egyptian revolution, the interaction between male and female young people was rather increased. Moreover, while data collection of this study involved conducting focus groups, there was evidence of good interaction and listening through the work of brainstorming and dialogue, discussion and debate on every conceivable subject.

Eldawdi (2012) discusses the consequences of this cognitive change in Egyptian youth mainly with respect to their political and academic practices.

With respect to the political influence, the Egyptian revolution influenced youth in the definition of democratic dialogue, which was not known to them before. The basic principles of the Egyptian revolution, seeking “freedom, dignity and social justice“, helped them to identify their rights, and how to claim them in a democratic and peaceful atmosphere.

In terms of the academic influence, the Arab Spring has altered the dynamics of the Arab world and education has been at the heart of the reform spirit of the Arab Spring (Mohamed. et al 2016). In detail, the Egyptian revolution affected university youth in the formation of protest movements critiquing the current situation in HE in terms of curriculum, teaching methods, and quality of teaching staff. It is worth noting that these appeals were made in a democratic discussion, where people listened to each other's opinions, shared and reflected peacefully. Eldawdi (2012) confirms that this sort of democratic discussion did not happen in Egyptian universities before 2011.

However, as a result of the rebellion, the Egyptian youth in general, and HE students especially, have more control over their lives and a greater voice in educational institutions. Moreover, they have now started to exercise power over someone else (such as their tutors) rather than simply being recipients of exercised power. In my view, implementation of DE adds to the tutor's role when constructing students' knowledge. Tutors need to examine students' learning objectives during the process of empowerment. The prerequisite of this knowledge construction is that learners control their educational process by being more fully embedded in it, and by possessing deeper ownership and empowerment over its mastery. In summary, for DE, students need to own and have control of their learning.

1.3 RESISTANCE TO DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

According to Apple and Beane (2003), DE and SCL have started to be promoted in Africa. The reason behind implementing SCL is explained by The South Africa Department of Education, as SCL is seen as the most appropriate method of breaking the abovementioned rigidity by fostering DE through learner participation, and promoting knowledge relevant to learners' social contexts and previous experience. In spite of the aforementioned benefits of DE, Okenyi (2007) notes that the DE system, which fosters SCL, is still in its infant stages in many developing countries in Africa, Egypt being among them. In detail, there is a growing resistance to traditional methods of teaching and assessments based on tutor-centred approaches. This resistance is due to tutor-led learning approaches promoting students' rigidity, passive actions and dependence. In the context of this study on Egyptian HE, Faour (2011) explains that in most of the Arab countries, teaching throughout the whole education system is still guided by the tutor who is, in most cases, the decision maker in the class.

The resistance to DE discussed comes from academic institutions, tutors, and students. The first kind of resistance can be explained by pointing out that, according to McDaniel (2008), DE empowers students to be able to make decisions regarding their learning in schools and as citizens in the community. Therefore, there is fear from the school or institution administration about giving students this power - from their view, students may use this power to challenge and threaten policies and rules (McDaniel, 2008). Moreover, from practising democracy, a collapse of control may occur between the different parties in learning (tutor-students-administrators). According to Hart (1997), this collapse would result in an educational instability in conservative systems of authority. Consequently, students may not be empowered to practice this democracy.

Moreover, if an academic institution does not accept DE, this may be an obstacle for tutors who consider it - according to Rogers (1994), if a tutor then starts to make efforts to give students responsible power, these efforts are likely to be suppressed by the school administration. Another obstacle to be considered is a nation's political direction if it is not democratic, as according to Hecht (2011), DE is an expression of a democratic society. In Egypt, after the rebellion of "Arab Spring" in 2011, according to Riley (2014), the old regime stopped the internet service for a limited time assuming that the online social network "Facebook" was the tool used by democratic movements to mobilise and explain their positions. Therefore, before students practise democracy outside their schools, there needs to be an increasing recognition of students' abilities to speak for themselves and practise democracy inside schools (Hart, 1997).

Other academic institutions may empower students and give them control in non-threatening issues such as meal planning, selecting wall colours or election of class representatives to sit on school councils (McDaniel, 2008). It is important here to highlight the risk of this sort of "window dressing" empowerment. For students, it quickly becomes apparent that they are invited to a mere tokenistic participation (Badham and Davies, 2007). When students find themselves part of a community, but are not empowered to be an active part of the group, this will be kept in their memory as being involved in a fake participation. The feeling of a lack of access to power signifies to them unimportance and unworthiness (Messiou, 2012). Thus, tokenistic DE may lead to students' low self-esteem and low self-confidence (Vanner, 2013). Moreover, it may result in affecting their ability to be leaders and may block and constrain their life progress as citizens (Messiou, 2012). Hart (1997) further explained the effect of disempowering students in their leadership as follows: in order to prepare students to be leaders and process any change within the community, it is essential to identify the problem, conditions and causes, while accordingly giving power to solve the problem and then begin to address any change in the community. Therefore, a lack of power for young citizens means a feeling of social isolation and not being socially centred to develop changes in their communities.

The second resistance is the student's own resistance against DE. According to Ruder (2008), not all students are capable of "doing" and making decisions. For example, at a young age they may need authoritative figures

to guide and direct them. The scientific reason behind this is that the human brain during the teenage years is not fully developed to make an independent decision. This is confirmed by Andolina *et al.* (2003), who state that not all students are able to practise their freedom of choice in answering questions about what, how and why they learn. Students prefer not to carry the responsibility of making a decision and its consequences. Accordingly, training and teaching practices are suggested to foster the development of such skills to shift the student from a dependent to a self-determined individual. For the implementation of DE, the question to be highlighted here is: do students receive a type of education that actively engages them as citizens in their own schools and communities? And if not, what type of education is to be provided?

According to Andolina *et al.* (2003), in order to prepare students for understanding and implementing DE, they need to receive a type of education that actively engages them as citizens in their schools and communities. According to The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) (2002), colleges and universities should place a new emphasis on educating students to be purposeful and self-directed, empowered through intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge and ways of knowing, and responsible for personal actions and civic values. For Weimer (2013), some learners are not ready to be self-directed and they need early preparation to be responsible for making decisions and given choices. Ferguson-Patrick (2012) suggests that some co-operative learning which emphasises DE should be adopted in the students' curriculum - for example, group projects where all students take on decision-making about some content and method. It is suggested that these groups should be flexible enough to avoid being evaluated by assessments. Hence, there are some promising examples of the implementation of DE in education as follows:

- In the UK, the UK democratic community that connects individuals, schools and organisations who practise or support democratic education in the UK (Phoenix Education Trust, 2014)
- The Directory of Democratic Education (2006) lists 175 democratic schools in 28 countries. It includes 15 colleges and universities with programmes that support democratic education (Graves, 2006).
- At Highfield Junior School in Plymouth, UK school aims have been successfully attained precisely through an emphasis on democracy. One of the rules is to resolve conflict peacefully, mediate and negotiate (Purkis and Bowen, 2004).

In the author's view, before practicing DE, students need to be prepared to receive learning that is engaging them and embed their decision making in it. Teaching practices need to be directed towards the development of students' skills and abilities to be motivated and engaged, participating and self-directed to manage the responsibilities of practicing democracy. Since, as discussed above, SCL is an acknowledged part of DE, an active involvement in the learning process by all members in the academic institution is expected to prepare the learning environment for easy access, understanding and implementation for DE. In other words, for a genuine DE implementation in education, the learning community must be SCL driven, and according to Okenyi (2007), teaching approaches that are teacher-centred are less likely to adopt DE.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of conducting this research is explanatory and descriptive to investigate how HE tutors perceive in the implementation of DE in the Egyptian universities. Therefore, an interpretive attitude of thinking which understands meaning and interaction between these elements is the philosophical perspective for this research. Also, research design is phenomenological interpretive. It starts with descriptions of lived experiences. Then, reflecting on and analysing these descriptions. This point of view is supported by many scholars such as Van Manen (1990) who explains phenomenology as a project of thoughtful reflection on the lived experience of human existence. In regards of sampling participants, the recruitment of participants for this study were conducted among HE tutors in the Egyptian universities. Data for this paper was collected from 20 HE tutors at two Egyptian universities both in focus groups and in individual semi-structured interviews. Finally, the selected approach to analyse the collected data is the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Smith et al. (2010), IPA is an approach to analyse data in a qualitative research with an idiographic focus, which means it involves the study of individuals.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on literature review, DE is entitled to empowering learners and placing them in the centre of their learning. Moreover, teacher-student trust and students' responsibility are other added entitlements to DE according to collected data from this study. Tutors highlighted two main issues in their perception to DE. Firstly, implementation of Democratic Education (DE) is essential to encourage exchanging ideas through students' engagement and participation, critical thinking and problem solving. Secondly, the importance of a dialogic approach between tutor and student.

Some tutors positively explained their attitudes to give control to their students in their learning. For example, tutor (T) 3 stated:

"When I give the students freedom of choice for an assignment topic, they search and make extra effort in searching for creative topics and they work harder on these assignments compared to other assignments than when I decided their topics for them."

It is worth mentioning that few tutors linked between DE and freedom and explained that giving freedom to students is conditional to students' understanding to this freedom. T 7stated:

"Freedom needs to be given in very small doses, and tested frequently, to make sure that there is good understanding and implementation of it."

On the other hand, other tutors in focus group (FG) 2, explained that DE is based on empowering learners and DE is conditionally implanted if students themselves are aware of its meaning. T16 in FG2 stated:

"If the students are responsible and can be trusted to manage their learning they can be empowered; if not, empowering learners is devastating for them"

Moreover, two tutors negatively explained their concerns from DE, as today's students are not ready for it, T 2 stated:

"This generation is not ready at all to be empowered or given control in their learning". Similarly, one tutor in focus group 4 concluded that "This freedom will be misused; it is a new language, and our students never spoke it before."

From the collected data, some tutors agreed on empowering learners and giving them control. However, according to other tutors, empowering learners need their understanding about what is meant by control, power and what is gained or lost when students are empowered. In details, there are concerns of students themselves that they are not aware of the meaning of DE and being empowered on their learning. Therefore, some tutors expressed their concerns of losing control on students. At this point, a question can be addressed: do tutors trust their students? That highlights tutor-student trust as an issue to be discussed in future research. Importantly, to answer this question, dialogic approach between tutor and student has to be addressed.

Friere (2014) claimed that dialogic learning is the basis for democratic and emancipatory education, and argued against education that treats students as vessels into which tutors and school administration pour information and practise dominant power. In order to correspond between student control and maintaining tutor-student relationship, McAllister and Litvin (2012), who experienced teaching in Arab culture, mentioned that there should be a code of conduct in sessions as a strategy whereby the tutor sets out the rules outlining the norms and responsibilities. Meanwhile, tutors need to communicate socially with students and develop a dialogic approach with them.

Rappaport (1987) adds that when people are empowered, they gain control over their lives and practice democratic participation in their communities. For participants of democracy, this given control is a sign that they have an important role in their communities and can share in decision-making. Benefits of democratic participation for individuals correspond with benefits of Democratic Education (DE) for learners identified by Hecht (2011) and Purkis and Bowen (2004).

Therefore, if in DE, both tutors and students work together democratically in active participation to create a positive environment Gribble (2005). Consequently, placing students at the centre of their learning cannot be implemented without empowering the learner.

It is worth mentioning that tutors in schools and universities do not empower their students for many reasons. Firstly, they did not experience being empowered as students themselves, which supports the view of Vrasidas and Glass (2004) who justified this resistance from the perspective that tutors teach as they were taught. Secondly, tutors were reluctant to give control to their students because they believe this would affect their cultural image as an authority in the class, which leads to lack of discipline. This agrees with Faour's claim (2011), that DE is not practised as required. Consequently, according to Doyle (2011), tutors may resist sharing this power because they are not used to it. Doyle's conclusion corresponds with Al-Sharhan (2014), that

flexibility of learning, affordance of open resources in learning such as using internet in search and placing the student at the centre of learning, offer a new paradigm of thinking for tutors in Arab countries. Therefore, tutors may need to practise sharing power with their students. Wachob (2009) proposed solutions to help tutors in the Middle East in empowering learners by changing the teaching materials and using a diversity of creative methods in the classroom. Barkley et al. (2005) suggested collaborative learning to add student creativity and interactivity to the face-to-face and OL environments. An example for a collaborative activity involves two or more students synchronously building and interactively deriving a joint solution to a problem.

Faour (2011), explains that teaching is still, in most Arab countries, guided by the tutor and DE is not practised as required. According to him, the result is a failure to encourage free analytical thinking in students and he recommends that tutors' guidance starts with open discussion and confirming active learning, since continuing with tutor-led guidance is unlikely to lead to student engagement. With reference to SCL, there are elements that SCL has in common with Democratic Education (DE), such as, DE's flow and exchange of ideas through students' engagement and participation, critical thinking and problem solving (Okenyi, 2007). According to McCombs and Whistler (1997), SCL similarly helps students to think critically while learning to analyse, evaluate and be reflective towards their own learning. Consequently, as a solution, SCL needs to be implemented, in order to promote students' critical thinking and to develop their skills for self-guidance. According to Doyle (2011), the challenge is that SCL is still not practised, since little literature focuses on what changes are needed to be made to shift from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning. For the Egyptian context, this is likewise an area where further research is needed. Faour's (2011) call for open discussion between students and tutors and DE, stresses that students need to receive a type of education that actively engages them as citizens in their schools and communities in order for them to be prepared to understand and implement DE. Gribble (2005) defined DE in its simplest terms as a sharing between tutors and students. This definition of DE extends the benefits of DE to enhancing the relationship between students and tutors as both work together democratically in active participation to create a positive environment. Okenyi (2007) stresses the importance of SCL as the most appropriate method of reducing rigidity by fostering DE through learner participation, and promoting knowledge relevant to the learners' social contexts and previous experiences.

Drawing on the analysis of the findings of my study about tutors' guidance, it can be summarised that, if HE tutors are promoting and supporting DE, they need to bridge the discussion gap between the tutor and student, as recommended by the South Africa Department of Education (Apple and Beane, 2003). They need to give youth the voice to brainstorm, discuss and debate (Farag, 2013). Primarily, to achieve all the aforementioned, HE tutors need to facilitate for their students to think critically while learning to analyse, evaluate and be reflective towards their own learning.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concluded that DE encourages the exchanging of ideas through students' engagement and participation, critical thinking and problem solving. In this regard, a dialogic approach and promotion of tutor–student interaction can help tutors to know about their learners to support their engagement and participation. Moreover, implementing DE is based on placing students in the centre of their learning and empowering them. In this study, tutors perceived DE differently: *positively* recognising its benefits and *negatively* with concerns to losing students' control or students misusing the given freedom. Therefore, there is a tendency to view DE by tutors in a narrow or thin way. In Egypt, the fact is after the Egyptian revolution in 2011, youth age groups were the most affected and most influenced in the way of thinking and reflecting. Consequently, this study highlights that empowering learners and fostering DE can help to develop an active citizen. Therefore, DE needs to be part of the educational paradigm to encourage the dialogic approach between tutors and students.

According to this study, HE tutors need to empower students in learning to maintain the learner's voice through methods such as brainstorming, group discussion and listening to their concerns, interests and needs. On the Arab national level in Egypt, there is a call for colleges and universities to reform their pedagogical approaches and curricula that place an emphasis on educating students to be self-directed and empowered through intellectual and practical skills, informed by knowledge and ways of knowledge construction. Further research about DE will enable the development of a framework for conceptualising democracy in education, highlighting, in particular, tutor-student trust. Moreover, DE from students' perspectives, regarding their understanding and readiness for it, is to be addressed in future research.

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